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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the findings of a study that compared identified desirable characteristics of state accountability reports with 20 accountability reports generated by 7 states. Desirable characteristics included (1) clarity (the intended audience, statements of purpose, a description of the population being reported on and the states' conceptual model for its accountability system); (2) comprehensiveness in the reporting of inputs, processes, and results for students, especially students with disabilities; (3) provide comparative information with changes over time between schools, districts, states, regions, or standards; (4) conciseness or carefully chosen indicators so that no more information is given than is necessary; (5) cautions (against misinterpretations of the data or against any unintended consequences); (6) confidentiality; (7) good formats so that reports are well-organized, readable, and interesting. Results found none of the reports contained every desirable characteristic. Very few reports were clear as to who was included, the conceptual model, and assumptions. Many reports were comprehensive, concise, and comparative, but were also unclear in their presentation of information. Only four of the states provided disaggregated data on students with disabilities. (CR)

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Technical Report 22

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Desired Characteristics for State and School District Educational Accountability Reports

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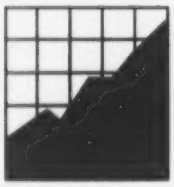
Technical Report 22

Desired Characteristics for State and School District Educational Accountability Reports

J. Ruth Nelson • James E. Ysseldyke • Martha L. Thurlow

November, 1998



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Executive Summary

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 105-17) was reauthorized in 1997, and one of the major additions to IDEA is the requirement that states report regularly on the performance and progress of all students, including students with disabilities. Most states now issue reports on student performance, and these accountability reports differ considerably in content and format. This study was conducted to identify stakeholders' views of desirable characteristics of reports, and to investigate the extent to which the characteristics were evidenced in a diverse sample of seven states' accountability reports. This study also provides guidelines for desirable characteristics in reporting that state department personnel can use to improve their accountability reports.

A descriptive study of accountability reports showed that none of the states' accountability reports that were examined met all of the desired characteristics. Four states reported disaggregated data on the performance of students with disabilities, yet these were primarily enrollment data.

There are a number of improvements that can be made to increase the readability of educational accountability reports. The following are some of the recommendations:

- Reports must contain clear statements of purpose, intended audience, a description of the population being reported on, their conceptual model, their mission/vision, and their assumptions.

- Reports should be concise. One way to address this issue might be to provide a pyramid of reports (from a continuum of more basic to more detailed reports) for the various audiences. A parent or citizen may want a basic report while a researcher or school board member may want more detailed information.

- Reports should be as uncomplicated as possible. Executive summaries, organizers such as a table of contents or glossary, and visual attention grabbers like pie graphs or pictograms can help the reader understand the contents.

By incorporating the guidelines in this study, we can improve communication on the educational results for students, and work toward better education for all students, with and without disabilities.

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Overview

Increasingly, state education departments are recognizing that inclusive accountability systems and the public reporting of educational results for students are important tools to help students attain higher educational standards. Many states have already designed accountability systems to ensure those inside and outside the educational system that students are moving toward desired goals (Brauen, O'Reilly, & Moore, 1992). With recent federal mandates, such as P.L. 105-17, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state education agencies (SEAs) must report, with the same frequency they do for nondisabled students, the number of students participating in regular and alternate assessments. Furthermore, performance data for students with disabilities must be disaggregated in reporting of results for students (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

The development of accountability systems is complex and in no way does "one way fit all" (McCaul, 1993). Multiple stakeholders first clarify the values that they are trying to optimize, educate themselves about their choices and trade-offs they must make, and determine how their future must differ from the status quo. They then must determine a design, implement it, and set up a process for evaluating it until it works smoothly and they achieve their desired results.

The creation of statewide accountability systems requires coordination (Benveniste, 1985). As accountability requirements have multiplied at the national and state levels, central school district administrators have had the responsibility for processing all accountability reporting requirements. Computerized management information systems permit the handling of large databases and schools can easily provide rapid reporting system information tied to the district information management systems (Benveniste, 1985). Integration of these data is also needed at the state level. Decisions about data gathering and distribution require coordination and integration. However, the usual organizational arrangement is for data to be collected by many different offices and agencies within a state government with no single body deciding what data to collect. Otherwise, as observed in previous reports on state assessment systems and reporting practices, one state can produce several accountability documents which come from different offices. New York is one example of a state that produces seven different accountability reports that come from various offices (Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Shin & Coleman, 1997).

Current state practices for reporting information to various audiences are a function of what people say or think ought to be reported, tradition, or what other states are doing (e.g. "This office has always produced this document"). According to Thurlow et al. (1997), states vary greatly in their reporting practices. In this qualitative study, members of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) found that almost every state does produce an accountability document, but that some states exclude students with disabilities from their accountability reports

altogether, others exclude those students who take tests with accommodations, while still others exclude those who have used a specific type of accommodation.

State accountability reports vary considerably in format, length, level of information given, focus, and stated purposes (Thurlow et al., 1997). Some states produce five or six 500-page volumes annually, while others produce a two- to three-page report. Many states use tables, spreadsheets, and the Internet to communicate their educational results. A few states give only state level data; others give school, district, and state level data annually. These reports vary in their focus as many do not provide any outcome information on students with disabilities, especially in regards to test-based outcome data. For example, only 12 states report test-based outcome data on students with disabilities. Many states use these reports for accreditation purposes while others use them for technical assistance, diplomas, compliance with state requirements, or to generate local, district, and national comparisons.

Performance standards should be clear, specific, and doable, so that parents, teachers, administrators, and the community can understand what they mean (LaPointe, 1996a; State Education Improvement Partnership, 1996). In trying to organize educational data, LaPointe (1996b) has also suggested that the key is to select a small, manageable number of indicators and to provide evidence of these same indicators for each school or each system, or each state, and demand that the observer take into account each of these sets of characteristics when making decisions. Consistency in measuring the same indicators is very helpful. At present, indicators used in accountability reporting cover a wide spectrum, from detailed financial information to student mobility rates, and from staffing information to minutes spent in math and reading. Some states report numbers of students who met state standards or goals; others do not. Further, every state had at least one report in which there were indicators that were not described clearly (Thurlow et al., 1997).

It is extremely important to take into account the large number of factors that describe the context of learning and school (LaPointe, 1996b). Much recent literature has pointed to aspects of family behavior, the community, and even cultural characteristics that have been associated with students' achievement outcomes (e.g., SES, family size, family involvement in school, parental education level, and caregiver-child relationships) (Bradley et al., 1994; Brody et al., 1994; Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Caughy, DiPietro, & Strobino, 1994; Duncan, Brooks-Gun, Klebanov, 1994; Feldman & Walton-Allen, 1997; Greenwood, 1991). For example, Kirst (1990) reports that achievement studies rarely calculate the impact of socioeconomic status and environmental factors upon pupil achievement, and consequently, we cannot hold teachers accountable for factors that they are unable to influence. As we devise accountability reports and compare states or countries one to another, or examine the performance of students, contextual factors must be incorporated into our indicator systems.

Without taking other contextual factors into consideration, there is a danger in inappropriately emphasizing results of national achievement test scores or incomplete "report cards." Reliance on such measures may not permit evaluation of program effectiveness for students with disabilities (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1991). Interviews with principals from the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC) regarding accountability reports confirmed that public reporting of accountability data through system or school report cards and by the press heightened their anxiety about narrowing the focus of public debate from their broad reform goals to things assessed by the system and profiled in these reports (Mitchell, 1996). The attachment of rewards and sanctions to their accountability systems made principals' concerns more pointed. In order to allay principals and other stakeholders' concerns about the development of accountability systems, flexibility should be given to these stakeholders in developing such systems.

Furthermore, NASDC principals in interviews highly recommended that you have to continue to take traditional accountability tests, but you also should look for new assessment instruments to test what you are trying to do because traditional tests do not do it justice (Mitchell, 1996). Additional indices or more thorough assessment methods may be needed to accurately evaluate the progress of students with disabilities (i.e., alternative assessment methods). Thus, the importance of using multiple measures in addressing accountability issues should be emphasized (LaPointe, 1996b).

While states have made improvements in their performance indicators, these systems are only as good as their data base. Some crucial gaps remain. In many states, little data exist on middle schools. Not much is known about how tracks and courses in the middle grades determine academic choices in senior high schools. Little integration exists between colleges and elementary-secondary schools. Although postsecondary schooling options exist for students, data on how these postsecondary students perform in colleges are often not attended to. In many states, high school performance data focus primarily on those students bound for four-year colleges or on those in the bottom quartile. What are the outcomes for those students in the "middle tracks"?

Kirst (1990) encourages states to closely scrutinize existing data. Possibly certain kinds of little-used financial data might be eliminated. New data demands on local SEAs might be eased by coupling them with reductions in other data requests. Creating a database that is manageable, concise but contains salient information will lead to improved accountability reporting practices and hopefully, improved educational outcomes.

Studies have shown that the exclusion of students with disabilities in accountability systems can impact their education. Students who are left out of assessments, and out of accountability reports, tend not to be considered when reform efforts are being created and implemented (Leone,

McLaughlin, & Meisel; 1992). Often "what gets measured gets taught" as well as "who gets measured gets taught." Exclusion can lead to educators' beliefs that they are not responsible for the education of these students or lowered expectations for students with disabilities (Yell & Shriner, 1996). Further, the removal of special education students from the "accountability track" also results, to a large degree, in their removal from the "curriculum track," and those learning expectations which guide the instruction of regular education students (Koehler, 1992). This results in the special education student becoming more and more isolated from the mainstream instructional program rather than having an alternate course being charted for reaching competence in mainstream subject area content.

Failure to hold schools accountable for the outcomes of students with disabilities is ill advised when evidence exists that students with disabilities are not reaching satisfactory achievement in basic math and science concepts, school completion, and employment. Colorado's Department of Education conducted a pilot study of indicators in several high schools (Colorado Department of Education, 1990). The study team analyzed data from 16 schools (939 students and 689 regular and special education staff) using student records, student questionnaires and interviews, and questionnaires from regular education and special education teachers and administrators. Some disturbing results included higher absence and out-of-school suspension rates for students with disabilities. Half (50%) of the 12th grade special education students with emotional or behavior disturbances—or with mental retardation—did not receive a diploma or completion certificate. Those with high absence rates also reported lower levels of satisfaction with school and were less likely to experience positive expectations and support from their teachers (1990).

Earlier studies of educational outcomes for students with disabilities have made special educators acutely aware that post-school outcomes of students with disabilities have not been satisfactory (Edgar, Levine, & Maddox, 1986; Hasazi, Gordon & Rose, 1985; Mithaug, Horiuchi & Fanning, 1985). Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS; Wagner, 1991) have supported the findings of earlier studies that nationally, students with disabilities drop out of school at a much higher rate than their nondisabled peers and that only slightly more than half of the students who leave school do so via graduation. These results have caused educators, advocates and policymakers to call for better outcomes for students with disabilities.

Not only should data on students with disabilities be reported, but data should also be disaggregated from the rest of the general education students. Better outcomes for students with disabilities are not assured even when their results are included in accountability reports; often the data can be overshadowed by the results of general education students (Geenen, Thurlow & Ysseldyke, 1995). Failure to report on disaggregated outcomes of students with disabilities leads to an absence of data on the effectiveness of special education services. McGill-Smith, an

advocate and parent, strongly links reform to the image of a train:

> Parents of children with disabilities are on the right platform, but we need tickets to get on the train. Outcomes data that help us evaluate reforms based on what works for our children are the tickets we need. (Ysseldyke, Thurlow, & Shriner, 1992, p. 49)

By reporting educational results for *all* students, we will be better able to evaluate services and work towards better education for *all* students.

Since current state reports vary greatly, are likely to be unclear, and often do not report disaggregated results for students with disabilities, this study was conducted to provide helpful reporting guidelines for state department personnel. A descriptive study of accountability reports was performed to address the following questions: (1) What do a group of stakeholders (state department personnel, special education representatives, assessment specialists) believe are the necessary, desirable, and succinct characteristics of good state and district educational accountability reports, and (2) To what extent do a sample of reports from seven diverse states reflect the criteria generated by this group of stakeholders, including criteria to include outcome data for students with disabilities?

The reports chosen for this study were compiled before the passage of P.L. 105-17. Thus, this study provides baseline data on how states report educational results before the provisions of the reauthorized IDEA came into effect. This study also provides guidelines for desirable characteristics in reporting that state department personnel can use to improve their accountability reports.

Methods

Participants

Under the leadership of the National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO), a group of state department personnel, special education representatives, and assessment specialists gathered in May, 1997 to discuss the necessary, desirable, and succinct characteristics of good state and district educational accountability reports. The participants in this special conference were members of the Council of Chief State School Officer's (CCSSO) special task group entitled, "State Collaborative on Assessment and Student Standards Assessing Special Education Students Study Group #5" (SCASS study group). These members volunteered to serve on this committee at their national CCSSO meeting. See Table 1 for a list of nationally representative stakeholders who participated in the two-day conference.

Table 1. Participants in SCASS Focus Group

Stakeholders	Represented Organizations
Margaret Crank	Arkansas State Education Department
Judy Elliott	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Ron Erickson	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Jim Friedebach	Missouri Department of Education
Marcia Harding	Arkansas State Education Department
Karen Langenfeld	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Vince Madden	California Department of Education
Ruth Nelson	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Ken Olsen	Mid-Southern Resource Regional Center Director
Ed Roeber	Council of Chief State School Officers
Dorene Scott	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Alan Sheinker	Wyoming Department of Education
Richard Smiley	Alaska Department of Education
Martha Thurlow	National Center on Educational Outcomes
Jerry Tindal	University of Oregon
Don Watson	Colorado Department of Education
Jim Ysseldyke	National Center on Educational Outcomes

Procedure

The first day of the conference was devoted to describing what reports should look like for the various audiences such as policymakers, parents, researchers, the general public, teachers and administrators, students, and the media. The members, as a large group, brainstormed the necessary characteristics to include when designing good educational accountability reports. After brainstorming, the group described each characteristic and how it should be implemented into a report for parents, policymakers, or the general public. See Figure 1 for the Checklist of Guidelines for State and District Educational Accountability Reports.

A nationally representative sample of seven states' accountability documents (IA, KY, MI, MT, NY, OK, SC) were chosen to compare against the list of desirable characteristics generated by participants of the accountability conference. These states were not only geographically diverse, but varied greatly in their reporting practices as indicated in a previous study of all 50 states' accountability documents (Thurlow et al., 1997). Accountability reports are public data published by state education departments and state education boards, and copies were obtained by telephoning state assessment directors named in the CCSSO annual survey (CCSSO, 1997). Since state documents are published by states at different times of the year, and many reports even within a single state can be produced at separate times, the author only used the most recent accountability documents published before December 1, 1997. A total of 20 accountability reports were gathered between August 1, 1997 and December 1, 1997. Refer to Appendix A for a complete listing of documents produced by the seven states.

Figure 1. Checklist of Guidelines for State and District Educational Accountability Reports

Checklist of Guidelines for State and District Educational Accountability Reports

CONTENT

Clear...

- ❑ Clear statement of intended audience
- ❑ Clear statement of intended purpose
- ❑ Clear statement of states' conceptual model for its accountability system (including inputs, processes, and results)
- ❑ Clear statement of state standards (or goals) or mission/vision
- ❑ Clear statement of assumptions
- ❑ Clear statement of who was included in the population of students being reported on

Comprehensive...

- ❑ Comprehensive, yet concise set of inputs, processes, and results
- ❑ Data on all students, including students with disabilities and limited English proficient students (students with disabilities and limited English proficient students' results are disaggregated)

Comparative...

Includes enough information to enable people to make fair comparisons among:

- ❑ Schools
- ❑ Districts
- ❑ States
- ❑ Regions
- ❑ Standards

Includes enough information to enable people to make fair judgments about changes over time for:

- ❑ Schools
- ❑ Districts
- ❑ States

Concise...

- ❑ Includes no more information than is necessary to convey a message to an intended audience ... brief

Figure 1. Checklist of Guidelines for State and District Educational Accountability Reports (continued)

Cautions...

Provides cautions against:

- ❑ Scapegoating
- ❑ Unintended consequences
- ❑ Negatives

Confidentiality...

- ❑ Maintains confidentiality of low frequency student populations

FORMAT

Readable...

- ❑ Appropriate for the intended audience

Responsive to the needs of intended audiences...

- ❑ Answers audience questions and provides accurate profile

Layout...

- ❑ Not cluttered or complex
- ❑ Organized and easy to find information (e.g., reader's guide, table of contents, index, glossary)
- ❑ Interesting (e.g., includes catchy titles, pictures, or other devices to get and hold audience interest)

Links...

- ❑ Statement of how and where to get additional copies
- ❑ Statement of how to get more detailed information

Executive Summary...

- ❑ Bulleted summary of report for a "quick read"

IMPORTANT OVERALL QUESTIONS

Is the report readable?	❑ YES	❑ NO
Is the report fair?	❑ YES	❑ NO
Is the report concise?	❑ YES	❑ NO
Is the report visually attractive?	❑ YES	❑ NO
Is the report accurate?	❑ YES	❑ NO

Each accountability document was read and compared against the Checklist of Guidelines to evaluate the reports. A Checklist was filled out for each of the document(s) produced by the selected states to see whether current state reporting practices reflect the criteria generated by the CCSSO study group. To ensure objectivity and accuracy in evaluating the reports, a reliability check was completed by another graduate assistant at the National Center on Educational Outcomes. The reliability index (agreements on selection of desired characteristics over agreements plus disagreements of selection of desired characteristics) was 93%. Frequency analyses of how many characteristics are included in state accountability reports were carried out and tabled.

Results

Tables 2 and 3 contain descriptions of the content and format characteristics of the 20 reports examined in this study, and Table 4 indicates whether these reports met overall important characteristics. None of the reports of this sample had every characteristic provided by the Checklist; however, there were a number of reports that provided good examples of individual characteristics.

Content

The content characteristics included by the states in their reports are listed in Table 2. Only one state contained all of the content characteristics in one of their reports (NYCAR). (For a list of acronyms and their definitions, see Appendix A.) Of the 20 reports produced by the seven states in this study, only five reports (NY, OK, and SC) included at least four of six characteristics regarding the clarity of the purpose, mission/vision, intended audience of the report, state standards, assumptions, and description of the population being reported on. However, none of the reports provided a clear statement of a states' conceptual model for its accountability system, and only one report (NY) contained a clear statement of assumptions about their accountability system. (One pilot study document from Iowa did mention that their accountability system is based on an adaptation of NCEO's model of outcome domains. However, this document was not used in this study since it did not contain any data.) Finally, only 9 of the 20 reports (45%) had a clear statement of who was included in the population of students being reported on.

A majority of states' documents (N=16) were comprehensive; they included input, process, and outcome indicators and/or included data on all students, including disaggregated data on students with disabilities and limited English proficient students. Five of the seven states examined were considered comprehensive (having at least one of the two comprehensive characteristics) in

Table 2. Content Characteristics Included in the Educational Accountability Reports of Seven States

State	Clear	Comprehensive	Comparative	Concise	Cautions	Confidentiality
Iowa						
ACE		■	■	■		NA*
Kentucky						
KACR		■	■	■		■
KIRIS			■	■		NA*
KCAAI		■		■	■	NA*
KSDL			■	■	■	NA*
Michigan						
MSR		■	■	■	■	■
Montana						
MPE				■		NA*
MSS				■	■	NA*
New York						
NYCAR	■	■	■	■	■	■
NYCSE	■	■	■			
NYSPE		■	■		■	NA*
NYSPP		■	■			NA*
NYPB		■	■	■		NA*
Oklahoma						
ODR	■	■	■		■	■
OSR	■	■	■	■	■	■
OSRC		■		■		■
South Carolina						
SCSPP		■	■	■		■
SCEP		■	■	■		NA*
SCSP		■	■		■	■
SCPB	■	■	■			NA*

*NA = This report does not make any indication of confidentiality procedures, but fewer than five students in a population are not reported in the report.

Table 3. Format Characteristics of the Educational Accountability Reports of Seven States

State	**Readable...** Appropriate for Intended Audience	**Responsive...** to Audience Needs	**Layout...**is not Cluttered or Complex, but Organized and Interesting	**Links...** to Get Additional Copies or More Detailed Information	**Executive** Summary...
Iowa					
ACE	■	■	■		
Kentucky					
KACR					
KIRIS	■	■	■	■	
KCAAI					
KSDL					
Michigan					
MSR		■		■	
Montana					
MPE					■
MSS	■		■		■
New York					
NYCAR		■		■	
NYCSE		■	■	■	■
NYSPE	■	■	■	■	■
NYSPP					
NYPB	■	■	■	■	
Oklahoma					
ODR	■	■	■	■	
OSR	■	■	■	■	■
OSRC	■		■	■	
South Carolina					
SCSPP					
SCEP	■	■	■	■	
SCSP		■			
SCPB	■	■	■		■

Table 4. Important Overall Questions of the Educational Accountability Reports of Seven States

State	Is the Report Readable?	Is the Report Fair?*	Is the Report Concise?	Is the Report Visually Attractive?	Is the Report Accurate?*
Iowa					
ACE	■	■	■	■	■
Kentucky					
KACR		■	■		■
KIRIS	■	■	■	■	■
KCAAI		■	■		■
KSDL		■	■		■
Michigan					
MSR		■	■		■
Montana					
MPE		■	■		■
MSS	■		■		■
New York					
NYCAR		■	■		■
NYCSE		■		■	■
NYSPE	■	■		■	■
NYSPP		■			■
NYPB	■	■	■	■	■
Oklahoma					
ODR	■	■		■	■
OSR	■	■	■	■	■
OSRC	■	■	■	■	■
South Carolina					
SCSPP		■	■		■
SCEP	■	■	■	■	■
SCSP		■			■
SCPB	■	■		■	■

■ = Yes

* Judgments about fairness and accuracy were subjective and based only on the written reports that were reviewed.

their reporting practices. Four of the seven states (IA, MI, NY, SC) included disaggregated data of students with disabilities. Eleven of the twenty reports (55%) included disaggregated data on students with disabilities. However, these reports primarily contained enrollment data. Two states (NY and SC) did provide disaggregated test-based data for students with disabilities. Two of New York's five reports were separate reports for students with disabilities.

Sixteen of the 20 reports (80%) provided comparative information such as comparisons between schools, districts, states, regions, or standards and over time for a particular state. All the states provide some comparative information in at least one of their reports. Even the two page report provided by Montana used normal curve equivalents to compare students with a "norm" that had been established at the broad national level (MSS). Four states provided at least one indicator that was compared to a national average (IA, MT, NY, SC). Many of these reports included comparative information between districts and schools (i.e., the same information was printed for each district and school and conclusions could be drawn with cautions). South Carolina also provided comparisons between districts on the performance on standards in two of its reports (SCSP and SCPB). Finally, the majority of reports contained at least two to five years of data to use to make comparisons and to note trends for districts and states.

Of the 20 reports reviewed, 14 (70%) were concise or did not provide more information than was necessary. Every state produced at least one report that was concise. These reports ranged in page length from a two page report (MSS) to a state that produced a 35 page state report (ODR). Of these 14 reports that were concise, only three were clear as well. Eleven of the fourteen reports that were concise were considered comprehensive.

In providing cautions within their educational accountability reports, only nine state reports (45%) provided cautions to be careful to: (1) not judge effectiveness of an educational program based on one test score, (2) remember the many other contextual factors that may determine a student's performance, (3) look at scores based on small numbers of students as not less reliable and valid, (4) note that school district area changes and service area changes may have occurred, and (5) realize there may be missing information that was not reported.

Confidentiality was noted if a state provided a footnote or remark in the text that they were careful not to report any scores based on populations of fewer than five to ten people. Many state reports did not provide such a note, but also did not provide scores for fewer than five students (N=11). Eight reports included such notes regarding confidentiality; however, one state report included results for populations of one student (NYCSE, the separate special education report).

Format

Only 50% of the reports (N=10) were considered readable (glossaries provided, readable type) or appropriate for the audience needs; 55% (N=11) had layouts that were not cluttered or complex (see Table 3). Twelve of the twenty reports were responsive to audience needs (60%). Only 50% of the reports provided links to get additional copies or more detailed information. Further, only six reports (30%) provided the reader with an executive summary of the report. Finally, two reports had all of the format characteristics as designated by the Checklist of Guidelines for State and District Educational Accountability Reports (NYSPE, OSR). Six reports had four of the five format characteristics (KIRIS, NYCSE, NYPB, ODR, SCEP, SCPB).

Important Overall Questions

As stated before, only 50% of the reports were considered readable, and only 50% of the reports were visually attractive (e.g., they included objects and devices that would hold the attention of the reader such as bar graphs, pictographs, balloons describing where to get more information, etc.) (see Table 4). Many of the hard to read and visually unattractive reports included spreadsheet formats with a large amount of information (numbers in small font) per page with short labels for categories. Nineteen of the twenty reports were considered fair. The one report that was not marked as fair was from Montana, in which scores were reported in normal curve equivalents based on five different achievement tests. The twenty reports appeared to be accurate. Six of the twenty reports were considered readable, fair, concise, visually attractive, and accurate (ACE, KIRIS, NYPB, OSR, OSRC, SCEP).

Discussion

Desired characteristics of state accountability reports were developed by primary stakeholders (state department personnel, special education representatives, assessment specialists), and the extent to which a sample of seven states' reports reflected those characteristics were examined. Though only 20 documents from 7 diverse states were sampled, it appeared that none of the reports contained every characteristic desired by primary stakeholders. Especially disconcerting was the result that very few reports (25%) were clear as to who was included in the population of students being reported on, the conceptual model used for its accountability system, and the assumptions about the state accountability systems. There were a number of reports that were comprehensive, concise, and comparative, but were also unclear in their presentation of information. A state can report a lot of data, but if it is not clear what the purpose of the report is, who it is intended for, what the conceptual model of accountability is, or who was included in the populations being reported on, the report can become meaningless to stakeholders.

Similarly, if only half of the documents were readable or appropriate for audience needs, then these reports will not be used by the audiences. For example, those reports that contained many pages of spreadsheet data with several undefined acronyms will not be understood by a typical parent, school board member, a school administrator, or university researcher.

Four of the seven states provided disaggregated data on students with disabilities. This is comparable to Thurlow et al.'s (1997) study that found 30 states reported at least one indicator of disaggregated data on students with disabilities. However, these data were primarily enrollment, and not outcomes data. Only two states report test-based disaggregated data for students with disabilities. We acknowledge that the nonrandom selection of seven states prohibits national generalizations. Having reviewed and completed a qualitative study on all 50 states' documents recently, we chose states that represented the diversity of reporting practices currently being used.

The instrument (Checklist of Guidelines for District and State Accountability Reports) was compiled as a tool for state department personnel to use when creating their accountability documents. It is only a checklist, with items that could be considered subjective. For example, the items asking, "Is this report accurate? Is this report fair?" are highly subjective because judgments can only be based on what appears to be accurate and fair. If a state department director were to fill this form out, she/he would know whether the data were accurate (missing data, deleted test forms and scores, *all* students were included, and so forth). It may even be presumptuous for a researcher to make those types of determinations based only on written educational reports. Furthermore, these results may not reflect actual practice. We knew from prior knowledge that one of the states did include students with disabilities in its score results, but nowhere in the text of the report was it clear who was actually being reported on, and thus was marked as being unclear. In order to prevent subjective bias of the one rater, another rater was employed to conduct a reliability check. However, this person also had previous experience with accountability reports, which may have affected their decisions.

These cautions aside, this study does provide baseline data on how states report their educational results before the provisions of the reauthorization of IDEA came into effect. Now that states will be required to provide alternate assessments and report disaggregated data on students with disabilities, reporting practices hopefully will change and become more inclusive.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

A number of policy implications can be drawn from this study. Most importantly, outcome data must be disaggregated for students with disabilities. This study confirmed again the paucity of information on students with disabilities, especially outcome data (Thurlow et al., 1997; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Langenfeld, Nelson, Seyfarth, & Teelucksingh, 1998). If we are not reporting on students with disabilities, then how are we paying attention to the educational processes used with these students?

There are a number of improvements that can be made to increase the readability of these educational reports. Foremost, reports must contain clear statements of purpose, intended audience, a description of the population being reported on, their conceptual model, their mission/vision, and their assumptions. If creators of a report know that it is intended for parents, then they will create a document that is more appropriate to their needs and background knowledge.

Conciseness is an issue when it comes to reporting. Many documents provide hundreds of pages of data. Is this necessary? Should we select indicators more carefully? Are these large documents really being used in their entirety? One way to address this issue might be to provide a pyramid of reports (from a continuum of more basic to more detailed reports) for the various audiences. A parent or citizen may want a basic report while a researcher or school board member may want more detailed information. This pyramid can lead to efficient reporting practices as well as more pointedly target various audiences' information needs.

Reports should be as uncomplicated as possible. Executive summaries, organizers such as a table of contents or glossary, and visual attention grabbers such as pie graphs or pictograms can help the reader understand the contents. Additionally, keeping the number of concepts per page limited will increase the understandability and readability of the reports. Finally, reports should provide links to additional copies or further detailed information.

Now that schools are responsible for reporting the educational outcomes for all students, it is important to examine *how* accountability reports are presented. Reports should especially be meaningful and presented in a clear format. By incorporating the above guidelines compiled by stakeholders, we can improve communication on the educational results for students, and work toward better education for all students, with and without disabilities.

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Appendix A

List of Acronyms and State Accountability Documents Used in Analyses

Acronyms and State Accountability Documents

Iowa

ACE. Iowa Department of Education (1997). *The annual condition of education report: A report on prekindergarten, elementary and secondary education in Iowa*. Des Moines, IA: Author.

Kentucky

KACR. Kentucky Department of Education (1996a). *Kentucky Instructional Results Information System 1995-96 assessment curriculum report*. Frankfort, KY: Author.

KIRIS. Kentucky Department of Education (1996b). *Kentucky Instructional Results Information System individual student report*. Frankfort, KY: Author.

KCAAI. Kentucky Department of Education (1997a, Sept.). *Kentucky school and district accountability results: Accountability cycle 2 (1992-93 to 1995-96) of content area academic index grades 4, 8, 11/12*. Frankfort, KY: Author.

KSDL. Kentucky Department of Education (1997b, Sept.). *Kentucky school and district corrected accountability results: Accountability cycle 2 (1992-93 to 1995-96) of school and district listings*. Frankfort, KY: Author.

Michigan

MSR. Michigan Department of Education (1996, March). *Michigan school report* [On-line]. Available: World Wide Web: http://www.mde.state.mi/

Montana

MPE. Montana Office of Public Instruction (1997a). *Montana public school enrollment data: Fall 1996-97*. Helena, MT: Author.

MSS. Montana Office of Public Instruction (1997b, April). *Montana statewide summary: Norm-referenced student assessment reporting*. Helena, MT: Author.

New York

NYCAR. University of the State of New York & New York State Education Department (1996a, Dec.). *A guide to the comprehensive assessment report of the New York state pupil evaluation program: 1996 Edition*. Albany, NY: Author.

NYCSE. University of the State of New York & New York State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (1996b, May). *Consolidated special education performance report for 1994-1995*. Albany, NY: Author.

NSPE. University of the State of New York & New York State Education Department (1997a, Feb.). *A report to the governor and the legislature on the educational status of the state's schools: Statewide profile of the educational system*. Albany, NY: Author.

NYSPP. University of the State of New York & New York State Education Department (1997b, Feb.). *A report to the governor and the legislature on the educational status of the state's schools: Statistical profiles of public school districts*. Albany, NY: Author.

NYPE. University of the State of New York & New York State Education Department, Office of Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities (1996d, Aug.). *1996 VESID Pocketbook of goals and results for individuals with disabilities*. Albany, NY: Author.

Oklahoma

ODR. Oklahoma Department of Education, Education Oversight Board & Office of Accountability (1997a, June). *Profiles 1996: Oklahoma educational indicators program district report volume I - eastern Oklahoma*. Oklahoma City, OK: Author.

ODR. Oklahoma Department of Education, Education Oversight Board & Office of Accountability (1997b, June). *Profiles 1996: Oklahoma educational indicators program district report volume II - western Oklahoma*. Oklahoma City, OK: Author.

OSR. Oklahoma Department of Education, Education Oversight Board & Office of Accountability (1997c, April). *Profiles 1996: Oklahoma educational indicators program state report*. Oklahoma City, OK: Author.

OSRC. Oklahoma Department of Education, Office of Accountability (1996). *1995-96 School report card, Edmond District, Santa Fe High School*. Oklahoma City, OK: Author.

South Carolina

SCSPP. South Carolina Department of Education (1996a). *School performance profile 1996*. Columbia, SC: Author.

SCEP. South Carolina Department of Education (1996b). *South Carolina education profiles*. Columbia, SC: Author.

SCSP. South Carolina Department of Education (1996c). *State performance profile 1996*. Columbia, SC: Author.

SCPB. South Carolina Department of Education (1996d). *What is the penny buying for South Carolina?* Columbia, SC: South Carolina State Board of Education.

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